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A PROTESTANT AND SOCIAL VIEW OF THE CHURCH

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The Church is a divine institution, just as all legitimate organizations, like the State, the university, the political party, or the private club, are divine institutions. This is the outcome of any thoroughgoing acceptance of the Protestant position of the essentially divine character of all life, the priesthood of all believers, and the rejection of local divine places. Any special claim the Church can make must be based not on its essential character but upon its purpose and aim, and its special efficiency in pursuit of some end. That some ends in life are higher than others goes without saying. The end of a private club is legitimate and praise-worthy, but it is not in the judgment of thoughtful men on the same level of importance for life as a university. It is true that any scale of importance is finally based upon judgments of value which are in the last analysis extra-rational. The end aimed at by all churches, and among them we must include synagogues, cathedrals, and the lecture-halls of the Ethical Culture Society, is the mediation to men of the unseen and eternal values of religion and ethics. And each particular church bases its claim for recognition upon its assertion that it is attempting to mediate the truest and highest of these values in the most efficient way it knows. We thus see that the Church or churches represent the community, or rather parts of the community, organized for a particular purpose. The older distinction between a visible and invisible church should have lost all meaning for a consistent Protestantism, because

it was fundamentally based on the false assumption that our relationships with God depended upon the mediation of the church, and that outside of the church there was no salvation. Hence to account for certain obvious facts, an invisible church had to be postulated. The logic of Protestantism makes any such assumption needless. Our relationships to God and salvation are not in the keeping of any church.

Nor is it accurate to speak of any separation between Church and State, for as a matter of fact it is the same community organized for two distinct purposes; but the purposes cannot be more than relatively distinct, and the community has always an interest in any organization and its purposes and can never permit entire separation. Nor have we actually either in the United States or in France any such separation. All that has happened is a changed relationship between the community organized for certain political purposes and the community organized for certain ecclesiastical ends. In the United States all ecclesiastical organizations receive a large subsidy, and are communal servants in so far as they accept remission of taxes. Even in France there is no real separation. The community guarantees protection to all ecclesiastical bodies and in a measure regulates their life. There is simply in France a more radical recognition of the real character of all such organizations within the communal limits. The community in its protection of the physical and corporate life of all churches recognizes them as a part of its life. It is a matter of expediency how far it taxes or subsidizes these organizations, just as it is a matter of expediency how far it should subsidize Trades Unions or private educational institutions. The assumption is always that some kind of social service is being rendered to the community.

Genetically, the ecclesiastical organization of the community, like the educational, was coterminous with the

political organization, commonly called the State. With the increasing complexity of human life and great differentiation of human needs, there has arisen a greater differentiation of function. Administrative and defensive organizations have arisen out of the political, and indeed with various degrees of deliberate separation from the political life. In one sense the political organization must always be supreme, because its main purpose is defence, and for that purpose it must control brute force. The maintenance of peace within and without demands physical force, and the community intrusts the control of this force to organizations which have seldom risen adequately to their high responsibility and have often lamentably betrayed their trust. Hence it is a grievous error to identify the State with any organization which temporarily controls the physical force of the community. Often history must decide whether the control of overwhelming physical force was exercised by the State or by a usurper. Only growing social experience and increasing knowledge and independence on the part of the individuals of a community will enable us to determine the adjustments socially most expedient between the various organizations which express various elements in the communal life.

At present the ecclesiastical organization of the community is probably both broader and more effective than any other expression of communal vitality. The only possible rivals are the political and educational interests; and on the educational field the ecclesiastical organizations are so interwoven with various institutions for promoting knowledge that alliance rather than separation is still the note of the relationship. In the political field it is noteworthy that as communal efficiency rises, there come into being administrative bodies which cease to be political and take over large areas of life once dominated by political interests. In the United States the

most exciting political election induces roughly fifteen million men to enter a polling booth once in four years, and spend perhaps an hour's travel in order to vote. On ordinary occasions the vote sinks to less than seventy per cent of this number. Moreover, only about one-sixth of the population are legally entitled to political expression at the polls, while over one-third of the community are avowedly organized ecclesiastically, and over two-thirds are probably more vitally connected with some church than with any political party. The churches, for example, have a seating capacity for nearly seventy per cent of the population, and the seating capacity more than keeps pace with the population, while the nominal membership outstrips it. On any given Sunday there are probably more people in churches of one kind or another than went into the polling booths in November for the Presidential election.

It may be that the churches are "losing ground," but there are no evidences of it on the numerical side. All the various organizations in which the communal life finds expression are relatively defective and inefficient. The political organizations are notoriously wasteful, time-serving, and ineffective. No one who has to do with the educational machinery can rise from the study of what it is as compared with what it might and should be, without sickness of heart. So also the community ecclesiastically considered is most obviously to a great degree badly served by the churches and synagogues. They are divisive, often narrow, selfish, and inefficient. There are however degrees of inefficiency; and just in the measure in which any of the ecclesiastical bodies are successful in mediating the highest unseen values to the communal life, just in that measure are they "true" churches and are doing what the community instinctively demands of them.

In the past the churches have failed in various degrees to mediate the unseen values to the communal life which was advancing in complexity and was possessed of an increasingly intelligent outlook upon life. This has been the fruitful cause of a constant restlessness and dissatisfaction within the organized religious life; and has resulted in the rise of new sects and organizations aiming at better expression of the vast variety of human needs. The various bodies minister to different levels of aesthetic and cultural demands. Nor does it seem likely that with increasing communal heterogeneity the rise of new organizations will cease. Exactly the same forces are at work in political parties, and we see the same stupid inflexibility, and the same waste and confusion. An examination of the historical facts seems to show that the political State and the ecclesiastical bodies have never been more than exceedingly partial and imperfect organs for the communal life, and one main trouble has always been that these bodies in an arrogant way have constantly assumed that they did really incorporate that life. Only the sad awakening of such years as 1517 and 1793 reveal the real facts of serious misrepresentation. No political State and no ecclesiastical body has ever succeeded in expressing the communal life more than very imperfectly. There is a higher citizenship than ever wholly organized a political State, and a nobler religious life than ever became completely embodied in an institution.

On reason however why the ecclesiastical organization counts for more than any other as an expression of the communal life is that in Christianized countries, at least, women and children are given more place. Political states have excluded all that the power-possessing class could safely exclude, and political parties have always had their eye upon gaining power in the political state. Hence the pressure of the ecclesiastically organized com-

munity is steadier, and the life of the churches more nearly representative of the whole community than any group of political parties. For this reason also the churches elicit an unselfish devotion and a steadier self-sacrifice than all other organizations put together, although in recent years the educational interest begins to some extent to rival them. The communal life has many needs and is slowly and often blindly fashioning organs to minister to those needs. The earliest of all such organizations are seldom sharply defined in their functions. The earliest forms of organization seem to have been of a political-military and a religious-educational type. The religious demands are however interwoven with all other demands, and the organs called into being to meet one set of needs must often adapt themselves to meeting an entirely different set of wants. The defensive organs become the organs for the exercise of internal political power. At the same time the danger of institutional life is rather fixity than extreme adaptation; hence both churches and political parties by their very nature tend rather to conserve than to create. Life is forever struggling within the organization for new and more perfect expression, and often it is hampered and crushed instead of conserved by the forms built up to guard it. These conserving forms of the past are often a weight and hindrance, and in a measure become misrepresentative of the real life of the organization. They however continue to have their function as an expression of the continuity of life, and as an abiding confession that the present is a child of the past, and should have a reverence for the parental life. As occasionally however the bark of a tree binds it and kills the tree, so in the ecclesiastical life creedal forms and ritual observances have more than once bound the religious life, and violent disruption or deadly stagnation has always ensued. No one can observe the churches of Spain or Italy with anything like

intelligent sympathy, and not realize that they are ministering to pronounced needs of the social organism; but at the same time it is also perfectly evident that they have long ceased to be the expressions of the total religious life of those communities, and that because of their religious and ethical imperfections many noble religious and ethical enthusiasms are being starved and stunted. And yet on account of the monopoly these churches possess of the organs for religious expression, it is difficult for any spontaneous religious wants to make themselves properly felt. This same thing is measurably true of Protestantism, particularly where the relationship between the political State and some one denomination is of the kind somewhat inaccurately known as "established."

In the United States the Protestant churches with all their evident shortcomings are essential elements in the communal life; at the same time they are no longer representative of the whole religious life even of the non-Roman Catholic population. For one thing, the financial burden of any effective ecclesiastical organization is very heavy. Buildings, rituals, an educated ministry, organs, choirs, are exceedingly costly. At least nine-tenths of the property of the United States is controlled by one-tenth of the population. This one-tenth is largely called upon to pay the bills of a relatively prosperous Protestantism, and "who pays the piper calls the tune." So it easily happens that the churches try to maintain a standard set by the prosperous one-tenth, and nine-tenths are consciously or unconsciously shut out. Or, what is almost worse, it happens that the churches try to minister to the "other half" without really knowing what are their religious wants and habits. We often hear of "today's demand" for this or that, for "ornate" worship or "intellectual" preaching, or "the simple Gospel," when the truth is that the demand is that of a

small and paying minority, while no one knows what would be the demands of the majority were it not so voiceless and uninterested. The real difficulty which faces the Protestant Church is an economic one. Its corporate life is relatively wasteful, and the constituency from which it would naturally draw its strength is economically taxed by the strain on its material resources. We have aped the cathedral-building which was once the open centre for the whole religious life of the community; then we close up the building, save for four or five hours a week. The waste is at once apparent. At the same time this difficulty faces the communal life on its political side. American democracy has as yet neither proper ecclesiastical nor political organs for making its real needs known. Nor have we any adequate machinery for meeting those needs, were they known. The church is simply a part, and a most important part, of the entire question of communal reorganization. In some respects it is both less wasteful and more democratic than the political and educational organizations. It takes in women and children, which the political organization fails to do, and it ministers to adult life as the educational organization has hitherto not done. Some radical political thought, realizing the institutional conservatism that inheres in all external organizations and finding it an obstacle in the way, fondly dreams of its destruction. In point of fact, it would be necessary to destroy all institutions to get rid of conservatism. Universities and schools are in general far more hide-bound in thought and custom than the churches, and for reasons a thoughtful man can easily supply for himself. They are, for one thing, built upon the external authority of a teacher addressing the immature. Nor would the destruction of institutional conservatism necessarily make for progress; because the energies of the communal life would at once be absorbed by the task of constructing new

institutions bound soon to develop their own type of conservatism.

The hope of the Protestant churches must be such a democratic reorganization of the communal life that they may rest upon a broader economic basis for their material life, and thus come into closer touch with great ranges of religious need and aspiration now untouched and undreamed of. The churches are no worse off than the schools and universities, which also now minister to the tastes and needs of a small possessing class, and respond directly to the life of that class, and only indirectly and almost by happy accident to the non-possessing class. The whole matter is one of relative inefficiency. We talk freely of pedagogic reform, and also of reconstruction of the church; but we do not know the needs to which pedagogic reform and reconstruction must minister—and no one knows, least of all the voiceless majority. We who are trying to minister in school and church to the supposed needs of a half-awakened Democracy are guessing in the dark. Our chiefest social service will be awakening the Democracy to demand its own economic, political, and religious self-expression. It may well be that an economically awakened Democracy, with political autonomy and real religious freedom, will give expression to its religious life in forms as different from those of today as a Quaker meeting-house is from a pagan temple. But it is more than likely that it will revert to many of the aesthetic inspirations of a pagan, feudal, and aristocratic past, and evolve out of them a richer and more inspiring symbolism. Indeed it is almost useless to speculate upon the direction the religious life of Democracy will take. The most we can do, we are in part doing, in cultivating a much larger elasticity in our ecclesiastical machinery. The Salvation Army, the Young Men's Christian Associations, the Boy Scouts, the various Settlement Guilds,

and the like, are all individually subject to serious criticism, but they are wholesome expressions of the church's attempt to adapt its life more completely to the whole range of human need. But at almost every point the worker is face to face with the lack of that economic autonomy without which Protestant individualism and spiritual freedom are unable really to find themselves. This disability we should frankly face, and instead of arrogantly identifying the life of the church with the religious life of the community, honestly admit that we do not and cannot comprehend the religious life of the community, and set ourselves to the task of awakening the community to its need of more complete Protestant and Democratic autonomy.